DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 354 CG 025 756

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TITLE Supervision of Marriage and Family Counselors. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-94-22
PUB DATE Apr 94
CONTRACT RR93002004
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counselors; Counselor Training; *Family Counseling; *Marriage Counseling; *Supervision; Supervisors; Supervisory Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on issues of importance to the supervision of marriage and family counselors. A brief overview notes that the defining hallmark of marriage and family supervision has been a systemic orientation. Other distinguishing features include a reliance on live forms of supervision, and the viewing of ethical issues within larger familial, cultural, and societal contexts. The next section looks at the complex family system and its influence on supervision. Marriage and family supervisory modalities are identified and their benefits are discussed. Contemporary forces shaping marriage and family supervision are described and the impact of social constructionism on marriage and family supervision is considered. A constructionist supervision method that uses a reflecting team of peers is described. Narrative-informed supervision is also presented. The digest concludes that promising additions to the field of marriage and family supervision involve questioning and collaborative team approaches that aid trainees in exploring and living out their ideal ways of being counselors. Contains 7 references. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-22

Supervision of Marriage and Family Counselors

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Overview: Distinctiveness and Complexity

The adage "training shapes practice" describes the work of most marriage and family supervisors. Taking this metaphor one step backward, most marriage and family supervisors also believe that "theory shapes training." In terms of theory, the defining hallmark of marriage and family supervision during its brief history has been a systemic orientation (Smith, 1993). Other distinguishing features include a reliance on live forms of supervision, and the viewing of ethical issues within larger familial, cultural, and societal contexts (Smith, 1993).

The Complex Family System and Its Influence on Supervision

A family system is often described as constantly evolving and self-regulating. During counseling, systemic change occurs via interactions among family members and via interactions with other systems (e.g., the supervisor, the counseling team, social service agencies, legal systems, and others) (Pirrotta & Cecchin, 1988). Furthermore, each client family can be understood as a special group of people sharing a unique history, and featuring unique operating rules and social behaviors.

For these reasons, marriage and family supervisees face a particularly complex and powerfully dynamic counseling situation in which they may experience a high level of anxiety (Pirrotta & Cecchin, 1988). Commonly used supervisory approaches, described below, may be thought of as avenues to effectively manage both the complexity and power of the family system, and any resulting supervisee anxiety (Pirrotta & Cecchin, 1988).

Anxiety also may occur when supervisees face counseling situations that parallel their own family backgrounds. Typically, rather than helping supervisees resolve family of origin concerns, marriage and family supervisors focus on helping supervisees develop clinical skills (AAMFT, 1993). Accepted practice among marriage and family supervisors is to provide competency-based supervision that is "clearly distinguishable from personal psychotherapy" (AAMFT, 1993, p. 17). This practice speaks to the general belief that with a solid repertoire of clinical goals and skills, supervisees can manage both their own emotions and issues and those of the families they counsel.

Marriage and Family Supervisory Modalities and Their Benefits

Marriage and family supervisors regard live supervision as particularly effective, because the supervisor can assist both the supervisee and the family by altering the course of counseling as it occurs. Modalities include telephone interventions, consultation breaks with trainees, and supervisor-as-co-counselor. Other conventional supervisory methods include delayed video or audiotape review, and verbal reports.

One goal of videotape review is to help trainees improve what Tomm and Wright (1979) described as perceptual and conceptual skills. After watching part of a videotaped session, supervisees might be asked, for example, to describe family members' common themes or behavioral interactions, to reflect on interventions that might work in similar future situations with client families, or to describe what they have learned about marriage and family counseling from the session. Using the supervisee's verbal reports also encourages clinical growth. Verbal reporting allows a mutual questioning process between supervisor and supervisee that helps the supervisee organize information about client families into useful frameworks for consideration (West, Bubenzer, Pinsoneault, & Holeman, 1993).

Contemporary Forces Shaping Marriage and Family Supervision

As societal perspectives change, so do marriage and family counseling and supervision. Because marriage and family supervisors view families within the larger social context, the field of marriage and family supervision may be more immediately influenced by changes in the social fabric than other related disciplines. Emerging forces affecting marriage and family counseling and supervision include the evolution of social constructionist ideas, the challenge of the feminist critique, a growing awareness and recognition of cultural diversity, and the assimilation of current research into training (Smith, 1993).

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Social Constructionism: Impact on Marriage and Family Supervision

Many ideas changing marriage and family supervision arose from a social constructionist perspective. This is the perspective that "realities are created and formed by our views of the world" (West et al., 1993, p. 136). Imbedded in this view is the assumption that there is no one "correct" reality; that there may exist a multiplicity of useful opinions concerning how to live life, and how to view the world. Counseling interventions informed by social constructionism often involve questioning sequences that illuminate new perspectives on life and new possibilities for living. Still, despite these more collaborative supervisory approaches, it continues to be true that supervisors oversee the work of supervisees, and "should recognize their legal responsibilities for cases seen by their supervisees" (AAMFT, 1993, p. 12).

Reflecting Team Supervision

One constructionist supervision method uses a reflecting team of peers. The process often begins with an interview in which one person questions a supervisee about a counseling-related case or dilemma while the team silently observes. Afterwards, team members share a variety of observations and thoughts they believe may help the supervisee in working with families. Some purposes of reflecting teams include a) having supervisees actively engage in coconstructing realities through the isomorphic form-follows-function reflecting process, b) creating a collaborative and supportive training atmosphere, and c) encouraging the sharing of alternative perspectives that may help supervisees solve counseling impasses or dilemmas (Davidson & Lussardi, 1991). Team members' thoughts are shared with the supervisee in a speculative manner, and are often posed using question stems such as "I wonder what would happen if ... " "Could it be that..." or "How would things be different if...."

Narrative-Informed Supervision

Another constructionist perspective increasingly used in marriage and family supervision emphasizes the self-defining nature of narratives. This perspective has been most fully developed by White (1992), who believes that the narratives we construct reflect and shape our reality and the way we live our lives. During supervision, White highlights supervisees' useful narratives about their "life as a therapist" (White, 1992, p. 86). The supervisor (or a reflecting team) helps the trainee in identifying and expanding "unique outcomes" (White, 1992) in counseling sessions, those breakthrough times when the trainee did something pivotal that helped the client family. The supervisor helps the supervisee weave these unique outcomes into an evolving narrative about the trainee's "preferred way of being a counselor." Examples of possible questions are "What does this [unique outcome] say about you as a counselor?" "What do you think the family members might tell me about how you helped them?" "What does this suggest about the future direction of your work?" (White, 1992).

Summary

Throughout its history, the field of marriage and family supervision has been shaped by the systemic orientation of its practitioners. Some prominent features of this orientation are a reliance on live forms of supervision, a contextual view of client families, and an educational supervisory role that emphasizes supervisee skill-building. Promising additions to the field of marriage and family supervision involve questioning and collaborative team approaches that aid trainees in exploring and living out their ideal ways of being counselors.

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